ABOS

Depot Town Rag

Volume 15, Number 5 *"All the news in one block in one month*

100% FREE Rag content

May 1992

- Frog Island 1992
- City/Township studied
- **RR lingo sticks**

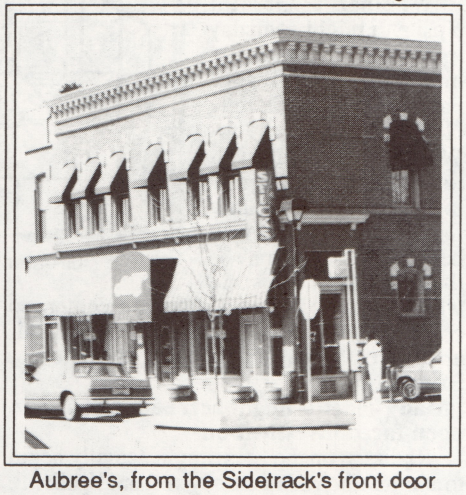
and other strictly local stuff. . . .

A Publication of the DEPOT TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. The Old Caboose, 400 Market Place, Ypsilanti, MI 48198

Oh, oh! We've become respectable!

Railroad taverns provide a base for this old depot district's economy

The Sidetrack, from Aubree's front door



Aubree's, from the Sidetrack's front door

Folks who've just discovered Depot Town are quite likely watching the trains from the front windows of the Sidetrack or Aubree's, but real railroaders and other old hands on the block will tell you that the most interesting view is from right beside the tracks . . . and Depot Town's two unique establishments are making that possible with their newest additions this summer.

Rather than being in hot competition with each other, Ypsilanti's best kept secret is out; these two railroad taverns are basically a one-family enterprise. Although they didn't start out that way, both of these highly successful businesses are owned by parts of the French family.

When Aubrey and Nan French ran the Alibi Bar, all the kids were growing up in Northville: Bill, Gerry, Linda, David, and Skip. Today, most of those kids are in the bar business, too. In 1971 Bill and Gerry bought the Alibi. Bill's wife Sandee became his partner in 1979 when Gerry left and the Alibi became Aubree's in 1981. DTA president Bill French is really *Aubrey* William French, and the '-ee' ending for the tavern's moniker comes from his partner, Sandee's, name. In previous years that same spot has been known as Dan's, The Oliver House, Oliver's and The Neat House. It's been a railroad saloon since 1897 when it had a tavern, dining room and upstairs rooms to rent for "railroad men." Today the second floor is a fancy pool parlor, called Sticks.

Linda French who, with partner Steve Gross opened the district's first antique furniture shop in 1972, moved their business to the current location in 1974. In 1982, when their next door neighbor, the Central Bar, closed down, they purchased the license and property and proceeded to 'gentrify' the place into the respectable watering hole it is today. Today's owners include Linda French and Marilyn Shedd. Brother David is now the manager of that prominent landmark.

The Sidetrack was previously known as The Central Bar, named for the Michigan Central, New York Central and Penn Central railroads which ran right past its doors — and knocked down the next door property years ago. The Sidetrack is of no relation to the fictitious *Sidetrack Tap* of Prairie Home Companion/Lake Wobegon fame. Garrison Keillor must have made that one up without ever coming to visit Depot Town from his Minnesota fancies.

This summer's addition of an outdoor patio/garden at the Sidetrack and a raised rear deck at Aubree's will, no doubt, bring a whole new appreciation of the traditional reciprocity of railroads and saloons. Sanitized as today's local examples may be, the legend of Casey Jones lives on in these places and they remain a center of social activity for the neighborhood.

Depot Town's taverns, far from being a franchise, are the neighborhood's oldest tradition -- with each being an independent and highly successful business enterprise in the current economy.

Happy New Year!

Most people probably think a *new year* should be celebrated in January -- when everything continues to be frozen and cold and dead -- but Depot Towners have taken to celebrating the new year when things begin to move outdoors again.

How warm does it have to be to feel the new year down here in the old railroad district?

It has to be so warm that:

- the side doors of the Freighthouse are open to admit the summer breeze
- sidewalk cafés fill to capacity
- the train whistles seem louder
- no one misses the furnace enough to turn on the air conditioning yet
- curtains flutter from apartment windows above the streets' shops
- old dogs sleep in the sun on the sidewalks
- screen doors give a satisfying 'slam, bang!'
- a recycling volunteer will smile
- coaster wagons, trikes and bikes park outside the candy and ice cream shops
- kids with fishing poles head for the Huron River fishing dock

AND . . . down in Depot Town we start looking forward to the return of gorgeously restored antique autos and street rods cruising the block, the triumphant return of the Frog Island Jazz Festival -- quickly followed by the Heritage Jazz Competition.

Come to think of it, the other seasons are pretty great down here too. It's just a question of "when do we want to celebrate it?" Maybe we like summer so much because we can fit so many more people in between the River and the Railroad track. More than three million will visit between now and Labor Day.

Happy New Year! It's going to be a great one again for Depot Town.

ADDENDUM:

The real thing is still here, too.

More conventional celebrants may wish to keep the New Year's Spirit going (w/o spirits) this coming December 31 when a gala *traditional* New Year's Eve will be celebrated in a giant celebration centering on local churches, the Freighthouse, Riverside Park and other unique Ypsilanti indoor and outdoor venues.

Successful planners and promoters of such an event in Kalamazoo have based their Ypsilanti proposal on a prototype from the East Coast called "First Night" Celebrations.

Watch for more tie-ins with the closing of the 1992 Festival of Lights in Riverside Park.

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Might Depot Town be the new 'downtown?'

Chamber of Commerce studies City/Township possibilities again

Hotels, pathways, traffic lanes and Cable TV

Last month saw the first announcement in a decade that someone was looking forward to greater cooperation between the City and the Township again. That much-feared possibility has long shaken politicos on both sides of the raggedy dividing line, but the concept is enough to strike terror into isolationists of every persuasion and, consequently, prod reporters from the local dailies to review past squabbles of our local territorial imperatives.

Greater Ypsilanti?

Whether a Greater Ypsilanti might someday look more like the neatly mapped rectangles of Farmington Hills, Sterling Heights, Warren or Westland which all swallowed up the original towns into their surrounding townships remains to be seen. Westland may be the only city in the world which is named after a shopping center, so could they, conceiveably, stretch our boundaries even more and become the City of Briarwood?

Many benefits might accrue from such an open-faced investigation:

• Radisson on the Lake might actually begin to admit in their ads that they're from Ypsilanti. The new Ypsilanti Post Office will be right across the street from them soon and that will make it almost embarrassing to list "On The Lake" as their mailing address. Maybe, after they've opened their hearts to Ypsilanti, they'll make enough money to pay back the City what they owe and the City can begin to take their many other projects off 'hold.'

• With greater cooperation, pedestrian walkways might be articulated so that one could walk from one unit to the other. As it is now, sidewalks and trails seldom meet, falling into dirt paths along roadsides. Township sidewalks now dissolve into City mud paths as walkers try to circumnavigate Ford Lake.

• Highway center lines and lane markings might also be standardized. Grove Road jogs at the City/Township border at Emerick Street, near Gault Village, and sends north- and southbound traffic into each others' lanes. The traffic planners' maps must resemble two restaurant forks joined akimbo at the tines. In restaurants or on the road, it's a jarring event to encounter.

Perhaps the biggest problem to surrmount in such an investigation is what to do with the left over politicians. Some, who have sat in on both City Council and Township Board meetings have suggested joining the two bodies -- on paper and in chamber. Township meetings are so short that, by the time the usually-late-arriving City Council members show up, the two agendae would seldom conflict.

As seen on TV? The most recent election campaign saw one candidate bemoaning the lack of coverage of City Council meetings on Cable TV. Perhaps, with anticipated cooperation of City and Township, those two bodies could kick back the fees they get from their Cable contracts and support the local Cable TV studio which the citizens of Ann Arbor enjoy so much. When we're sated with Channel 8, 9 & 10's Ann Arbor City Council, Ann Arbor Board of Education, Ann Arbor Planning Commission, Historic District Commission and Local Elementary School Musical Pageant of the Opening of the West to Manifest Destiny, we might actually see something about Ypsi's destiny, manifest or not. After all, we pay the same fee to Columbia Cable.

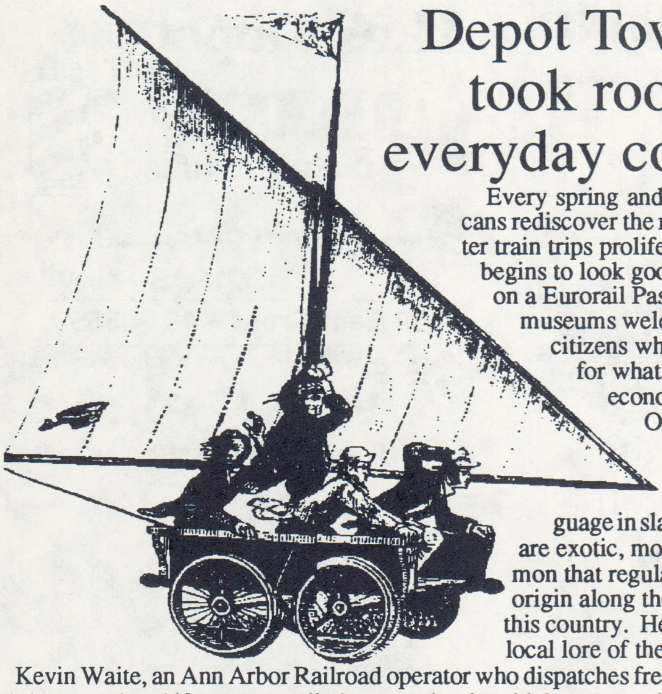
Until the Chamber's investigation is concluded, local citizens should probably refer to each of the local governments as "Lesser Ypsilantis, I & II"

When and if all this comes together perhaps the only space left over to be called the "city center" is little old Depot Town. No one can find Downtown Willow Run, and even Superior Township in all its rusticity uses us as its metropolitan center. We've long been the only hope of merging Willow Run, Ypsilanti and Lincoln school districts, even if it's only a bunch of teachers and administrators meeting for a beer after school on Friday nights. Outlying shopping centers proliferate around all our municipalities, chartered or not, but they just don't give the effect of being a city. "City" means "downtown." Look what happened to Los Angeles just because it didn't have one. We shouldn't let that happen here. Don't Californicate Ypsilanti.

In the March 29 *Ypsilanti Press*, publisher Wayne Studer suggested, "How the two governments work together and finding ways they can work together better has a tremendous impact on this area's ability to compete with others for the economic development that is so important to a healthy community." And if we *don't* find those ways, the "tremendous impact" will continue -- but not to anyone's benefit.

Meanwhile, city slickers and country cousins can still meet at the tables down in Depot Town -- and at the Chamber of Commerce -- and dream of the possiblity of improved cooperation between our local governments.

Depot Town's lingo took root in our everyday conversation



Every spring and summer, millions of Americans rediscover the romance of railroading. Charter train trips proliferate, Amtrak's Ameripass begins to look good in comparison to travelling on a Eurorail Pass for a week, and railroad museums welcome an influx of enthusiastic citizens who develop new appreciation for what the railroads mean to our economy and landscape.

One of the surprising things they discover is how much of the talk of the railroad has permeated our daily language in slang and idiom. Although some are exotic, most of the phrases are so common that regular users are not aware of their origin along the tracks and Depot Towns of this country. Here's our annual send-up to the local lore of the railroad . . .

Kevin Waite, an Ann Arbor Railroad operator who dispatches freights between Toledo and Ann Arbor wondered if anyone really knows why the old depot near the north end of his assignment is called the 'Gandy Dancer' — and he's eager to share his background and knowledge in this month's annual train issue.

Kevin worked at the Norfolk & Southern railroad control tower in Wayne until they closed it down two years ago. Rather than be moved to a non-train job with N&S, Kevin opted for a buy-out and went right to work for Ann Arbor down in Toledo.

Kevin's dad, Depot Towner John Waite, still works as a conductor on N&S, and the two of them have passed on many of the following etymological oddities. John Waite was instrumental in promoting the arrival of the old caboose to this neighborhood several years ago.

Gandy Dancer: The Gandy Shovel Company made a long-handled, flat-bladed shovel which was used by both the Irish and Chinese laborers who built the transcontinental railroad which was commemorated by the driving of the 'golden spike.' When they had to pry tracks or ties with that long shovel, it often jammed underneath the heavy load with one of the workers sitting on the handle, bouncing it up and down. Hence, that worker was referred to as the 'Gandy dancer.' That's a long way from the fancy fish served a few miles down our track to the west.

High balling: You can probably find a drink named after this rail term at every railroad tavern or depot-turned-tourist-attraction, but the original use had to do with the fact that a round emblem -- usually a ball -- was hoisted atop the railyard signal pole to signify that the track ahead was clear and top speed was permitted at that time. "High balling" was going at a high rate of speed. Hmmm? One marvels at how the term ever transposed to the world of imbibing alcoholic beverages.

With a **full head of steam** is another phrase which transposed easily to the barroom. Originally it referred to the engine's boiler putting out maximum efficiency. The alcoholic version was less efficient, but very exciting.

Letting off steam seems to do for our psyche almost as it did for the steam engine. Releasing that excess pressure was good for both, otherwise an explosion was imminent.

To be **sidetracked** was to get taken into an unexpected siding and left for an undetermined amount of time. Both boxcars, thinkers and drinkers succumbed to this technique. Depot Town's was the counterpart to the alibi. As is documented on page one of this issue, both of this block's railroad taverns took advantage of the genre; The Sidetrack continues to be rich in local railroad lore in its decor.

On the right track at first had to do with where the train was headed after it passed the switch. Now it signifies "right thinking" in a philosophical sense. Depot Towners like to use it as a double entendre, of course. Anyone shopping or doing business in this neighborhood is certainly "on the right track."

To **deadhead** a train was to bring it back empty and when the followers of the Greatful Dead band return from a concert they describe themselves with the same colloquialism. "Deadheads" have become a cult following of one of the oldest and most revered groups in the history of Rock 'n' Roll.

Special thanks, this month, to the whole Waite family for their continued contribution to the revitalization of Depot Town. James Waite, Kevin's uncle and John's brother, was the architect who first drew plans for the replication of the Crossing Guard Tower. Being one of the few in the family who is not involved in the everyday life of the railroad, James is a preservation architect at Colonial Williamsburg and came across the photo of the 1893 tower about twelve years ago. His working drawings for its replacement have been modified several times since then, but his original interest spurred what has become a reality, today.

It could be said that the whole Waite family is **on the right track** when it comes to involvement in this old railroad district and they're not **sidetracked** by less important issues. Maybe it's their way of **letting off steam**.

Thanks. . . to Kevin, John and James.

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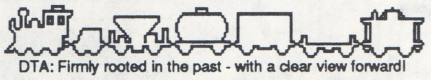
Depot Town Association, Inc., 16 April 1992


DTA: Firmly rooted in the past - with a clear view forward!

Minutes correction: Street Rod and Fire Engine Muster are two different events not to be conducted on the same day.

Treasury: $1110.94 in the General Fund. The final report on the Blues and Jazz Fest will be made at next month's meeting.

Freighthouse Committee: No report.

Communications:

• Spoke with Dave Siglin (The Ark) regarding forthcoming check for Frog Island Festival.

• DTA has been nominated for an award from the Michigan Council for the Arts to be presented at Washtenaw Community College in early May.

• Letter to Visitors & Convention Bureau board saying we are concerned about decision that may be made concerning consolidation of Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti VCBs. We would like to be contacted and kept informed of future discussions and we would like to have input as the DTA before a decision is made. Copies to Council, commissioners, VCB.

Music Committee: Kudos to volunteers! Future jazz events will need a corporate sponsor for at least half the cost. Discussion on Heritage Jazz Competition: Should it happen? Any other gimmicks? Carolyn and Sandee on committee to meet with WEMU regarding partnership during Heritage Fest.

New Year's Jubilee will happen — non-alcoholic pub crawl with RCTC, two churches, Freighthouse, Riverside Park, etc.

Rag Report: Non-supportive sponsors will be dropped for lack of payment.

Caboose: Total cost of repairs is estimated at $6953 not including painting. We need another bid for a total of three.

Landscaping: Met with Bob Doyle from Johnson, Johnson, and Roy, although not representing them. He's a landscape architect and president of Kerrytown in Ann Arbor. Would like to offer services to Depot Town. "You don't have to spend a lot of money to do a good job." He spoke of coordinated pot plants. Used metaphor of contribution and commitment with pig and hen. For ham and eggs - a pig gives a commitment, a hen gives a contribution. Bob's willing to make a contribution.

May 2 Street Rod Show: All business are encouraged to stay open late for those who will attend this high-draw event.

The President's Message

New VCB organization studied

The Depot Town Association, at its April 16, 1992 meeting, was informed that a committee has been formed by the Ypsilanti Area Visitors and Convention Bureau to research and review the possible benefits and liabilities of combining our Ypsilanti Area Visitors and Convention Bureau with the Ann Arbor Convention and Visitors Bureau.

It was decided to ask the Chair of the Ypsilanti Area Visitors and convention to keep our Association informed of the progress of this committee and its findings. We concluded that, as a business district in the Ypsilanti area, representing a National Historic District and its businesses, it is important before any conclusions or decisions are reached that we are given the right to express our opinion.

I believe this a serious issue that might effect the entire City of Ypsilanti and its businesses. It's time to get us and all other interested parties aboard on the decision making process.

- Bill French, your prez

√ Possible VCB alliance with Ann Arbor?
√ City and Township operations studied to increase efficiency?
√ General restructuring and reorganization of traditional business organizations?
√ Other liasons with a 'greater Ypsilanti' in the future?

Many agenda items lately point to the possibility of great changes being made in the near future. Let president French know your questions, concerns and ideas on these several possiblities and know that Depot Town's angle is being heard at up-coming deliberations. In fact, you can go to the meetings with him, if you wish. -ed.

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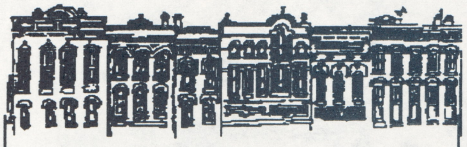


Strictly local stuff:

May 1992

Depot Towners are invited to participate in any or all of the following activities for the good of this old commercial district:

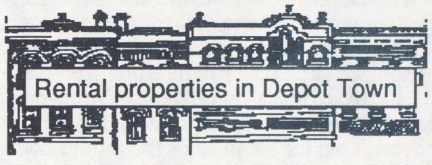
Depot Town Association
7:30 p.m. Thursday, 21th
The Old Caboose

Depot Town Antique Engine Club 28th
7:30 pm, Thursday
Freighthouse Coffeeshop

1991-1992 DTA officers

President	A. William French	483-1870
Vice president	Dave Blackmer	485-7546
Secretary	Sandee French	483-1870
Treasurer	Bettie Dodd	482-6371

This month's Shoppers' Survey:
Delores Bailey, Belleville
Karl Dyke, Ann Arbor
won FREE dinners for two at either
Aubree's Saloon or Sidetrack.
Special thanks to all who completed the tiny yellow surveys throughout the district. Your response helps us to serve you better.



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THE DEPOT TOWN RAG
A publication of the Depot Town Association, Inc. a nonprofit, tax-exempt corporation dedicated to preserving the unique character of the neighborhood and to the enhancement of its business climate.
-Tom Dodd, editor

The Depot Town Association, Inc.
A. William French, president
c/o The Old Caboose
400 Market Place
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198

Frog Island 1992

The joint will be jumping ...

... June 19, 20 & 21

What started out as an informal jazz concert in the neighborhood park has become big business for Ypsilanti's Depot Town distirct as it enters its second decade.

In 1982 the Depot Town Association and WEMU co-sponsored five well known musical groups in a day-long event which used this City park in a unique way. Since then the concept has developed into a three-day event with up to twenty different performing groups and artists in a festival which is recognized for its excellence by jazz musicians and enthusiasts around the world.

Ownership change finalized: This year DTA has finalized the sale of the concept to The Ark, a much-respected folk music organization from Ann Arbor. DTA minions now serve only as advisors and volunteers for somebody else's event, but the primary focus remains the same: it brings crowds of nice people to the block.

Program book profitable: One of the few responsibilities remaining for old organizers of the event is the publication of the magazine/program booklet for the event. Ironically, the Association often makes more profit on the publication of this single document than it sometimes did from the whole Festival, due to emergencies caused by inclement weather. Deadline for any business wishing to be included in this year's 36-page slicker is May 8. Active Depot Town businesses are encouraged to take advantage of this excellent opportunity to acquaint new traffic with their local offerings. The jazz crowd returns all year!

Frog pins available: Three-color cloissonné pins commemorating the Festival are available for tie-in sales the month before the event as a fund-raiser for the Depot Town Association again this year.

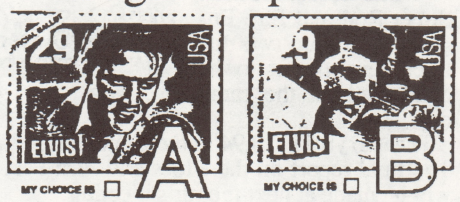
Volunteers still needed: Yes, the old guard can still get in free and know that they're contributing their effort to a great musical cause. Call The Ark at 761-1800 to arrange to serve in set-up, security, ticket-taking, clean-up or bartending.

A boon to walking traffic: The past ten years have proven the Frog Island Festival creates the largest, most loyal congregation of customers for the district's promotional year. Restaurant and bar specials, green-jazz-frog themes, and unique tie-in sales with the event have proven to be highly successful for many business owners. Many shops have added extra hours and/or extra help for this annual attraction.

Regional advertising exploited: Spot commercials on many radio stations draw tourists from a three-state area and the Visitors & Convention Bureau promotes the Frog Island Festival as a major attraction -- along with Heritage Festival, Drum Corps International and the Gus Macker Tournament.

Ticket information and the complete lineup of perfomrances will be announced in the June issue of *The Rag*.

"Stamp of Approval" sought in Ypsilanti



Maybe the new Post Office on Whittaker Road had something to do with an Ypsilanti Ward Five Councilmember asking for a local decision on the proposed Elvis stamp right after she was sworn in again.

Then the "Committee for Good Government" asked if this was an "approporate use of the city council's time and your tax dollars?"

Hmm. It's springtime in Ypsilanti. When is the Madonna stamp going to be issued and how can we help?

Older kids on the block: Tower tots identified

Thelma Smith recognized her Mom and Dad in the photos of the April issue and says that was them standing at the Forest Avenue crossing guard tower holding her sister, Verna Jean. Her mom, her aunt Vi Butler, and Jen Frentner were the young women posing in the other 1919 snapshot. Baby Verna Jean was in the tiny doll carriage. Today baby Verna Jean Millage lives on Janet St.

Thelma can easily count herself as a Depot Town Kid, since it was both of her grandfathers who were responsible for the elaborate gardens at the MCRR depot in Ypsilanti. Thelma's parents were Ellen and Harry Hubbard, the children of John and Mary Lou Laidlaw and George and Mary Jane Hubbard. In addition to their work at the depot, Laidlaw and Hubbard were responsible for removing the cemetery at Cross and Prospect to its present location at Highland Cemetery and for the design of Luna (Prospect) Park which replaced it.

Thelma tells an exciting story about growing up as a third generation Depot Kid: The family lived at 417 Maple Street, and she remembers catching tadpoles and fireflies in Luna Park across the street. In his later years, grandfather Hubbard lived with Harry and Ellen as they created their family of fifteen children.

Always a dreamer, Harry Hubbard decided to move the family from the depot neighborhood in 1922 to find their fortunes in Florida. Along the way, Thelma's brother Eldorse (Buddy) was born in Bethune, South Carolina. After living in a citrus grove for two years, they returned to Ypsilanti to finish out their family which would then include Thelma, Howard, Verna Jean, Faunchon, Eldorse, Ellen, Walter, Barbara, Robert Lee, Marco Jane, Kenneth, Rose Marie, Malcolm, Sharon and Claudia. All were born in Ypsilanti except for the itinerant Buddy/Eldorse.

Upon the family's return to Ypsilanti, Thelma's husband Leo worked at Hammernick's Meat Market in Depot Town and was a butcher at Sinkule's Market, as well. Her father Harry Hubbard no longer worked at the depot, but at the American Express Company in the Freighthouse and, finally, at the Willow Run Bomber plant. Husband Leo died in 1958, when his oldest child, Richard, was sixteen. Judy, Bonnie and Joyce were the three younger children, and Judy still lives near her mom.

The far-flung family still meets for an annual reunion — as close as possible to mother Ellen Hubbard's birthday on July 19. Mother Ellen passed away at the age of 75 in 1970 and Harry Hubbard passed away 45 days later at the age of 79. This year's reunion will take place at a family member's home on Textile Road.

One of the Hubbard/Laidlaw's favorite stories is how the maternal grandparents came to America. John Laidlaw was born in Scotland, and Mary Lou Marsden came from England. They met on the boat to America and were married on board before they were naturalized at Ellis Island. It was after their arrival in Ypsilanti that Laidlaw became the most famous gardener on the Michigan Central Railroad line. Their daughter, Ellen, was the mother of Thelma — who now lives near the Willow Run High School and still thinks of herself as another 'kid' who was fortunate enough to grow up in the exciting and dynamic neighborhood called Depot Town.

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A Depot Town SAMPLER

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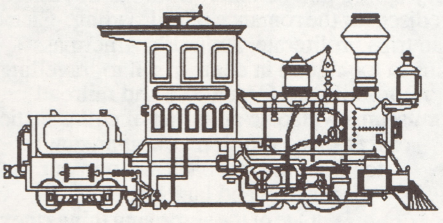

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CSX offers the "Ultimate RR Raffle"

With prizes like color TV's and trips to Las Vegas, the average raffle seems pretty ho-hum. But how about this: a week-long excursion aboard a luxurious CSX transportation business car. Now *that's* a prize.

That's also what you'll win if you enter a raffle being sponsored by CSX and Operation RedBlock, the employee-run drug and alcohol prevention program for railroaders. Proceeds from the raffle go directly to Operation RedBlock. The effort is being spearheaded by Jack R. Bengston, a veteran conductor who works on CSX's ex-Chesapeake & Ohio mainline between Grand Rapids, Mich., and Chicago. Bengston says RedBlock has made tremendous strides in reducing substance abuse on the railroad; the raffle is one dramatic way of attracting more interest in this commendable program.

Here's a description of the First Prize: A one-week trip on an Amtrak train aboard the business car, complete with chef and stewards, for up to four people. The winner can choose from among any Amtrak/CSX routes, including Chicago-Washington, D.C., or Washington-Jacksonville, Fla. The train will be parked at the appropriate station in the destination city, available as accommodations during a sightseeing layover. Also included: round-trip air fare from the winner's home to the oringinating point of the train, and an as-yet-undetermined amount of spending money.

Tickets are only $1, certified check or money order with SASE to

"Baltimore Division RedBlock Raffle"
Operation RedBlock, P.O. Box 762
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through May 15. The drawing is May 21.

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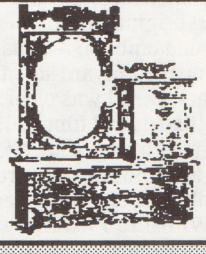

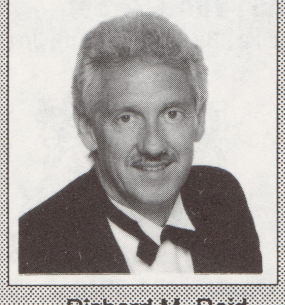
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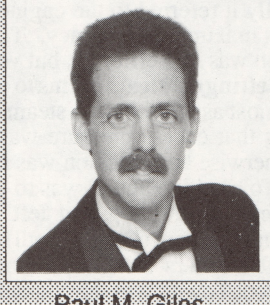
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